

## STEPHAN HILLYER LEVITT

### THE INDIAN ATTITUDE TOWARD WRITING

A number of years ago when India's Harijans began agitation for their right to entrance into orthodox Hindu temples which had been guaranteed to them by India's constitution, one of the means sometimes resorted to by Hindus of purer ritual status to keep Harijans from bathing in the temple tanks was to place crocodiles in the tanks. If Harijans were to bathe in temple tanks, this would prevent Hindus of higher caste from bathing in the tanks without becoming ritually polluted. It was considered better to have no one perform ablutions on account of crocodiles than to have no one perform ablutions on account of ritual pollution and to have to incur the extreme expense and trouble of purifying the tanks after being polluted by the Harijans.

Near one such tank in the state of Tamilnadu in India's south there was a sign put up which read, « There are crocodiles in this tank, « *inda kuḷattil mudalai y-irukkīradu*. *Mudalai* is the Tamil word for « crocodile ». *Kuḷam* is a temple tank. *Kuḷattil* means « in the tank ». The first word means « this », and the last word is a form of a verb « to be ». One individual, jokingly, scratched out the syllable *-da-* from the word *mudalai*, thereby changing the sentence to. « There are breasts in this tank », *inda kuḷattil mulai-yirukkīradu*. And the new sign was taken to be a great joke by the local residents.

Humor goes directly to the heart of a culture. It reflects and relies on what is normal and what is unique in a culture, and

on what is commonplace and what is uncommon in a culture. The humor here is that the sign, « There are crocodiles in this tank », represented the thing itself, a thing of awesomeness. The message had the same import that a skull and crossbones on the side of a road might have to us. The sign is the thing. The sign was transformed, though, into a pornographic cornucopia comparable to Rabelais' wall of Paris and full of the heavenly delights depicted in the erotic sculpture on the Hindu temples of Konarak and Khajuraho, all by scratching out a letter. At the same time as stating the enduring sanctity of the temple tank on account of crocodiles, a transformation of hell to heaven worthy of an Indian Merlin had been accomplished simply by the omission of a letter. And herein lies the humor.

A similar attitude toward writing is shown by a Tamil opinion about the significance of the Tamil letters for the sacred syllable *ōm*. (The Sanskrit syllable *om̐* is written *ōm* in Tamil, Sanskrit *o* being a long vowel *ō* in Tamil, and Sanskrit *m̐*, or *anusvara*, a nasal sound lacking closure, being represented simply by the labial consonant *m* in Tamil). The grapheme for *ō*, a vowel, looks like and is taken to represent the ear (see fig. 1). By a traditional Indian attitude the ear, the ability to hear sound, is a manifestation of sound and of the soul which permeates the universe in the form of an underlying sound. The grapheme for *m*, a consonant and labial nasal continuant, represents the phenomenon of sound, the eternal reverberation and gross sound which is perceived by the soul. The syllable written in Tamil script is understood to represent the ear hearing sound, the soul and phenomena, two manifestations of the underlying sound of the universe in their relationship to one another. The written form is not just a statement of the thing or just a charting of the thing, but it is the thing itself on which philosophical analysis can be based.

Elsewhere in India, in northern Bengal in India's northeast, there is report of the name, « Rāma », being written on the door of the lying-in room at childbirth to prevent evil forces from entering and so as to drive away such forces. Rāma is one of the most popular Hindu gods who in Indian epic tradition did battle with evil beings. The written form is here the very presence of the deity and of his sacred force.

In another Oriental tradition closer to us on the surface than that of India we find an analogous attitude. This is the Hebrew tradition. On *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, the Jewish new year and day of atonement on which days God writes and seals the destinies of individuals for the coming year, writing implements are not supposed to be carried or used. Writing on such a day has the force of the sacred, and because of this is to be shunned by mortal ordinary man. There are beliefs handed down by the Jewish tradition that when Hebrew prayer books were burned during different periods of persecution, the letters could be seen ascending to heaven. By tradition, prayer books are buried in consecrated ground, just as are people. A scroll with the most sacred prayer of the Hebrew tradition is placed on the doorposts of homes. And the Ten Commandments, considered to be the word of God, were carved inalterably into stone. In being carved into stone, it demonstrated the connection of the Hebrew tradition to that of Mesopotamia as opposed to Egypt, let us say. It also demonstrated an attitude toward the permanence of the written word. The tablets, containing divine written word, were considered to have such ritual potency that if anyone who was not ritually pure touched them or the arc in which the divine written word was carried, even to prevent a calamity, such a person was instantly struck dead (Second Samuel 6).

In the Occident, we continue such an attitude in our reference to the Old and New Testaments as the Bible, that is, *The Book*. It is divine written word, as opposed to all other written word. A religious attitude toward the Bible is in basis an attitude we inherit from the ancient Near East through Judaism. Such an attitude is continued as well in our attitude to legal documents. If a name on an indictment is misspelled, for instance, the indictment is invalid, and it cannot be made again.

It can be shown that, in general, India shares many of her traditions and many of the periods is her religious development with the Near East. Both India and the ancient Near East share the ancient tradition of fable literature. Both share what has been referred to as a « floating tradition » of wise sayings, such as, « Do unto others what you would have others do unto you ». (The Indian version is, « Do not do to others what you would not

want them to do to you »). The Indian Vedic religion and the religion of the ancient Near East both deified aspects of nature in similar ways and can both be characterized by that now out-of-fashion word, « henotheism », which refers to the worship of one god without denying the existence of others. While the ancient Near East developed monotheism in Judaism, Brahmanism, the precursor to Hinduism, developed monotheism in the person of a creator god Prajāpati, and later developed an impersonal monism. Similar mythologies such as the first creation story in the Old Testament, for instance, and the Noah story are shared. Just as Judaism developed dietary restrictions, so Brahmanism has evidence of similar dietary restrictions. Emphasis on a savior and on a divine child appeared in the Near East and in India at the same times, and an emphasis on divine love occurred also in Christianity and in India at the same time. In similar fashion, one section of the religious complex referred to as modern Hinduism believes along with Christianity that a savior, in the form of a yet-to-come god Kalki who has come before in the person of such gods as Rāma and Kṛiṣṇa, will return and destroy the evil-doers. These are all aspects of shared developments.

The same tradition also was shared with regard to writing. Both Indus Valley Civilization and ancient Mesopotamia, which had commercial contact with one another, used seals with inscriptions in related scripts. And modern Indian scripts go back in origin to a script possibly derived from, but even if not, certainly related to Middle Eastern Semitic scripts.

Our earliest evidence of writing in India, the Indus Valley script, is in clay, a permanent substance, just as ancient Near Eastern writing was in stone or clay, generally understood to indicate an attitude of permanence toward writing (see fig. 2). We cannot tell whether or not writing was executed on less permanent substances in India as well at this time. Our earliest record of writing with the later scripts also is in stone, and we also cannot tell whether or not it was written on less permanent substances at the same time (see fig. 3). Certainly, when we first meet the Indian tradition in literature in the *Rigveda* and in later Vedic texts, the premium is on memorization of textual material and

not on the written recording of it. It may well be that if a mispronounced syllable of the sacred *Veda* could slay the mispronouncer, as is stated in the *Brāhmaṇa* literature which followed the composition and compilation of the four *Vedas*, then a written text had even greater force, and that it was this and not a lack of knowledge of writing which placed the focus on the transmittal of our early texts on memorization.

The names of many of the scripts in India reflect divinity. The earliest of the later scripts, for instance, was called *Brāhmī*. This is the name of the female aspect of the later creator god Brahma. She is his power, and she is speech as a divine force. The modern Indian letters and script in which Hindi is written, and in which Sanskrit commonly is written today, is called *Devanāgarī*, most probably « the script of the gods ». There is some disagreement on the precise meaning of the name *Devanāgarī*, generally considered to mean either « belonging to the city of the gods » or « city-[script] of the gods ». But it is most probable that the word *nāgarī*, the name of the original variety of this script, meant originally « city-[script] ». And that later, by a time when different varieties of the script developed, it had come to mean « script » alone, referring to an aspect of the high culture characteristic of cities, as in modern Thai. This would explain such a related script as *Jainanāgarī* for instance, « the *nāgarī* of the Jains », a religious group which grew up in India alongside Buddhism, being referred to as well as *Jainalipi*, clearly meaning, « the script of the Jains ». The name *Devanāgarī* would indicate a divine aspect to the script. Another related script, used for Sanskrit in South India, is *Nandināgarī*. This would mean, « the script of (Shiva's mount) Nandi ». A mount, or vehicle, of a god is a symbol of the god's nature and presence, referred to in the Indian national epic, the *Mahābhārata*, as a banner, a characteristic sign or an ensign. The name *Nandināgarī*, therefore, refers to the presence and power in the letters of the great auspicious and benign god Shiva.

Divinity for writing similarly is indicated in the earliest Sanskrit dictionary for which we have a full text, the *Amarakosha* or « Dictionary of Amara(sinha) », perhaps « The Immortal Dictionary », learnt by heart wherever Sanskrit is studied by traditional

methods. (Since there is an integral relationship between word, soul and the universe in the Indian tradition we perhaps can refer to a thorough-going dictionary, a book with words which describe everything, as being immortal). The text cannot be dated yet, but it can be seen that it contains much information which is early. In this dictionary as presently edited writings, perhaps letters, are noted to be children of the goddess Aditi, an abstract goddess representing « eternity ». The children of Aditi are the creative forces of generation in the universe, and in strict terms usually seven divinities the chief of whom is the early head of the moral order of the universe, Varuṇa. In agreement with this, an early text on astronomy which contains a large amount of cultural information classes those who know writing together with those who know magic, conceived of in practical terms as the snaring net of the chief Vedic god Indra, and song, conceived of as the art of celestial beings.

In a script tradition closely related historically and geographically, that of Tibet, there is considered to reside within each letter of a written book a deity. And the written section of a page of a book is understood to have about it in aura, indicating its divinity, just as do humans, speech and the deities of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. This aura often is indicated by physical means in Tibetan handwritten books. Such an aura can similarly be seen to be indicated on the pages of an occasional Indian traditional book (see fig. 4).

Indian script clearly is in the realm of the sacred.

It has been pointed out that one of the characteristics of the sacred is what we might refer to as « flip-flops ». Something of high status in a tradition may be given low status and *visa versa*, for instance. Such happened in Europe during the Feast of Fools, on Shrove Tuesday, and during Mardi Gras, to give only three instances. In India we have examples of such reversals of standard values in certain Tantric rituals. Indian values place a premium on sexual continence and vegetarianism, so in these Tantric rituals we have indulgence in sex and the eating of meat in the sacred sphere. Indian values place a premium on wisdom and spirituality, and on the theoretical embodiment of such values, the Brahman. And so in one of these « flip-flops » in the fable litera-

ture, the Brahman, a wise and holy person who partakes of the sacred, is depicted as a fool. It is generally understood that Kṛiṣṇa, one of the most popular gods, is depicted « dark », or « blue », because his name indicates this. Yet the name of another god, Rāma, in its basic significance also means « dark », and Rāma is depicted very fair. By my understanding, Kṛiṣṇa's depiction with dark, or blue skin is exactly one of these « flip-flops » in the realm of the sacred. There is a premium in Indian society on light skin and so, in the realm of the sacred, one of the most popular gods, Kṛiṣṇa, has dark skin. Such a blueish hue as used to depict Kṛiṣṇa's very dark skin can be seen used as well in the depiction of dark skin in Burmese parabaiks. As another instance in the realm of the sacred in which the premium in Indian society on light skin results in the depiction of a god with blue, or dark skin I can point to a painting from Sri Lanka showing Indra which I have seen, in which Indra is also depicted in blue.

The accepted value upon which the premium is placed is stated not to be good enough in the real world, and is likened to its opposite. Eating meat emphasizes not taking life of any sort for sustenance, an impossible ideal perhaps, but conceivable in a spiritual context. Engaging in sexual activity likens even the slightest sexual activity to an orgy. Calling a wise man a fool emphasizes the value placed on wisdom by suggesting that the wise man is not wise enough. Depicting a god with dark skin emphasizes the fairness of his pure form.

We similarly often state the opposite of a situation in order to emphasize its sanctity and provide sanctity to it. A person giving a job to a friend, for instance, might say, « I can't give a job to a friend just because he's a friend. He's got to be the best person for the job ». He thereby states implicitly the sanctity he places on his friendship while at the same time giving sanctity to his choice.

Such reversal also can be seen with regard to writing in India, and its specifics are not only interesting but indicate further the sanctity of writing in India. On account of the sanctity of script, we often appear to have low value placed on writing in India. A second early script used side-by-side with *Brāhmī* script in a

limited area, for instance, was called *Kharoṣṭhī*, or "ass-lip". While we occasionally obtain very elegant Hindu manuscripts, no fine calligraphy has developed in India outside of a short period in Nepal to India's north. Scripts have evolved rapidly one from another in contrast, for instance, to the history of script in China and Europe. No single script is used for either Sanskrit, the sacred language of the Hindus, or Pāli, the sacred language of southern Buddhism. Writing often is sloppy, even when it records very sacred texts and is written by professional scribes.

Further, scribes themselves can be described as of low status in traditional India. While they have obtained high positions on account of the usefulness of their services, and while the profession is described along with « calculation » and « counting » in *Vinayapīṭaka* 4.7 as being prominent, scorn appears to have been heaped on them as, for example, in *Aushanaśhasmṛiti* 5.35, Bilhaṇa's *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 18.42 and in various places in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, such as 5.180-4, 8.131, and 8.2383. *Yājñavalkyasmṛiti* 1.332 places them together with rogues, thieves, bad characters, and desperados.

The main contemporary grouping which serves as scribes in northern India, from the vantage of ethnographic aspects such as their mourning observances, belongs to the fourth and lowest class of Hindu society, the *śūdras*, though they were able to achieve at times official twice-born *kṣatriya*, or ruling class status in British Indian courts. In parts of the Telugu country in southeastern India, the secular *Niyogī* brahmans serve as scribes. While *śūdras* bow to them, ecclesiastical brahmans address them with a benediction. Elsewhere in southern India, the function of scribes is filled by different castes of *śūdras*.

In short, the profession while it is influential is not a high status profession by the dint of the occupation. *Vedavyāsaśmṛiti* 5.10-11, in fact, places scribes together with potters and barbers.

That there is this draw in two opposing directions between an influential position on the one hand, and a low status on the other hand, is a particularly good example of the results of a reversal in the realm of the sacred playing itself out in the secular world.



Also interesting and indicating the sanctity of writing in India, as well as extremely consternating to many Westerners, is that many Indians tend to be poor correspondents. It is as if they avoid letter writing. This has been my experience, and it has been the experience of others whom I know. I am embarrassed to admit the number of letters that I have written to maths, museums; businesses, and scholars that have gone unanswered.

This is not to say that there are not good Indian correspondents. But it is open to question whether in this regard these correspondents are in the Indian tradition or rather in the mainstream of Western tradition. Volumes of letters, for example, have been published which were written by Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi.

In Indian literature, a letter is a very significant thing. It is not the frivolous matter of, for example, early Japanese literature.

A letter appears in at least three plays in Indian literature. In one, the *Mālavikāgnimitra*, a letter is involved in setting up the plot. In two, the *Mālatīmādhava* and the *Mudrārākṣasa*, a letter is used in the resolution of the play. In the *Kathāsaritsāgara* three letters in different stories in *taraṅga-s* 5, 20, and 42 are « letters of death », a common story motif in which a letter commands the death of someone. In one story in *Kathāsaritsāgara* 39 a letter is affirmed to announce impending death to a brother. In two stories, in *Kathāsaritsāgara* 43 and 101, letters announce safety, and in *Kathāsaritsāgara* 101 the letter further announces impending arrival. This letter is accompanied by a verbal report, but the letter clearly has the greater force since it is by it that the circumstances become clearly known, not the message. In one story, in *Kathāsaritsāgara* 56, there is a letter from a princess to her father following the wedding night and informing the father that her husband is a eunuch, followed by a letter from king to king announcing that the former will slay the latter for deceiving him with his eunuch son. And in two stories letters propose marriage, these in *Kathāsaritsāgara* 43 and 102. The latter further threatens combat if the request is denied. In the *Vetālapañcaviṃśati* there is a miraculous sandalwood drum which beats when enemies approach inside of which there is found a letter from the king's

minister announcing he is well and relating the drum's properties. In the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* letters are noted to be credentials in *taraṅga* 4 and dispatches in *taraṅga* 6. In *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* 3 a letter from a king, a royal document, is saluted upon receipt. In *Theravāda* Buddhist literature, in *Kaṭāhaka Jātaka* a letter proposes marriage between the bearer and the recipient's daughter. And in the *Mahā-Ummagga Jātaka* a queen sends her brother a letter telling him of the king's order to kill him and warning him how to act. It is part of a strategem whereby a wise man proves himself. In *Mahāvam̐sa* 5 letters arrive all at once announcing the completion of *vihāra*-s, or monasteries. In *Mahāvam̐sa* 33 there are two letters, an initial letter and a response, regarding handing over the kingdom. In the *Milindapañha* a letter is compared to knowledge which is permanent.

To be kept in mind is that part of the Western function of letters in India is served by verbal messages. In the *Gītagovinda* there are verbal messages between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa delivered by a confidante. In the *Naladamayantyupākhyāna* of the *Mahābhārata* geese deliver messages between Nala and Damayantī. In *Kathāsaritsāgara* 44 most communication is done through verbal messages. In *Kathāsaritsāgara* 101 the verbal message gives the news and the letter confirms the message. In the *Mudrārākṣha* the letter is somewhat veiled, and serves to authenticate the verbal message. The *Kāmasūtra* emphasizes verbal messages delivered by a go-between. Written notes are mentioned in *Kāmasūtra* 5.4, but in the same rubric with verbal messages carried by a go-between. And it is clear from the tone of the text up to that point that a direct written message would be very bold indeed. It is just this which gives the force of the marvelous in the beginning of Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* to the mention of love letters of *apsaras*-es, or celestial nymphs.

In only one case among the above number of instances of letters in Indian literature, in *Mahāvam̐sa* 33, do we have a letter serving as a response to a letter. And in *Mahāvam̐sa* 33, the return letter is a strategem.

Also of note, fully three of the above letters are forgeries — one in the *Mudrārākṣhaśa*, one in *Kathāsaritsāgara* 42 and one in the *Kaṭāhaka Jātaka*. This is a high percentage.

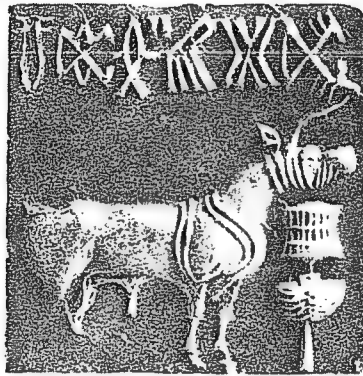
Of additional interest, we do not have in Sanskrit or Prakrit literature a category such as « Sanskrit literature — letters ». We have Nāgārjuna's *Suḥrillekha*, or « Letter to a Friend », which comes to us however through Chinese and Tibetan translations, and we have some illustrated Jain *Vijñaptipatras*, or letters of invitation between Jain monks. We have no correspondence of the great philosopher Shankara to my knowledge, no correspondence of the great philosopher Madhva. To my knowledge we have no depositories containing correspondence of historical consequence. By comparison, in China we have Sung dynasty letters and Sui dynasty letters, for example. Among Ancient Near Eastern materials we have letters in our archives. And among European materials we have letters in our archives. In good part this point is perhaps moot on account of the effect of the Indian climate on simple letters. But isn't it interesting that the one good example we have of a Sanskrit letter, Nāgārjuna's *Suḥrillekha*, comes to us through Chinese and Tibetan, and that the *Vijñaptipatras* we have, which are late, have been preserved on account of the artwork.

In different words, and from a slightly different context, we can probably judge that letter writing in India has been to an extent avoided on account of written word having the force of sacred law. As *Milindapañha* phrases it, it is knowledge which is permanent. What is written is true. It is *The True*. In short, the written word is so valued, that it must be devalued since the sacred is *ipso facto* dangerous. This may explain why we do not have large numbers of letters in our depositories. As will be seen shortly, that a letter has force can be seen from the treatment given the envelope which contains it.

Scribes can probably be judged in this context to have low status for the same reason as do barbers. In writing they make errors. Just as barbers in cutting hair kill life itself, so scribes incur sin and therefore pollution from, so to speak, butchering text, or word. The written word is sacred. It is divinity. By



a



b

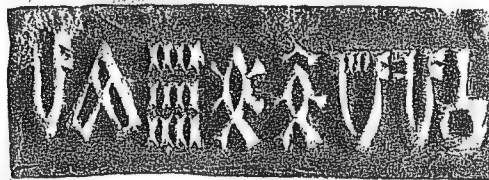
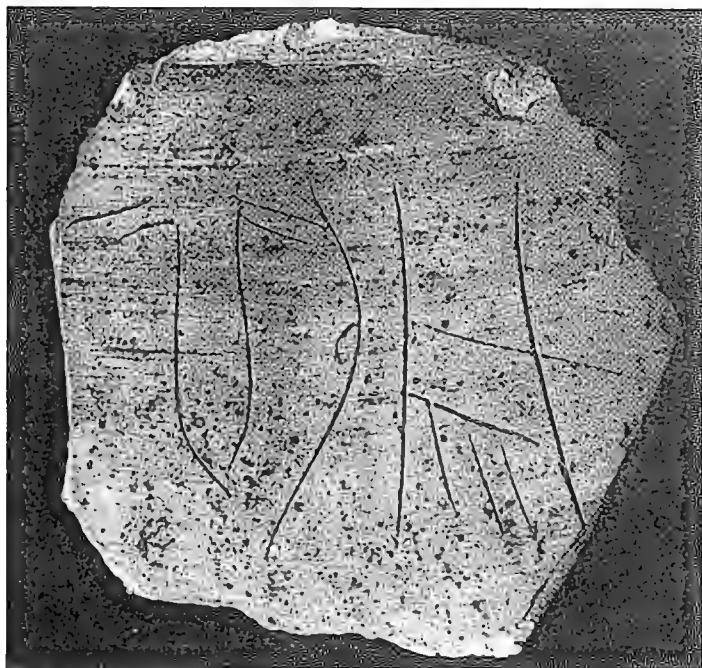
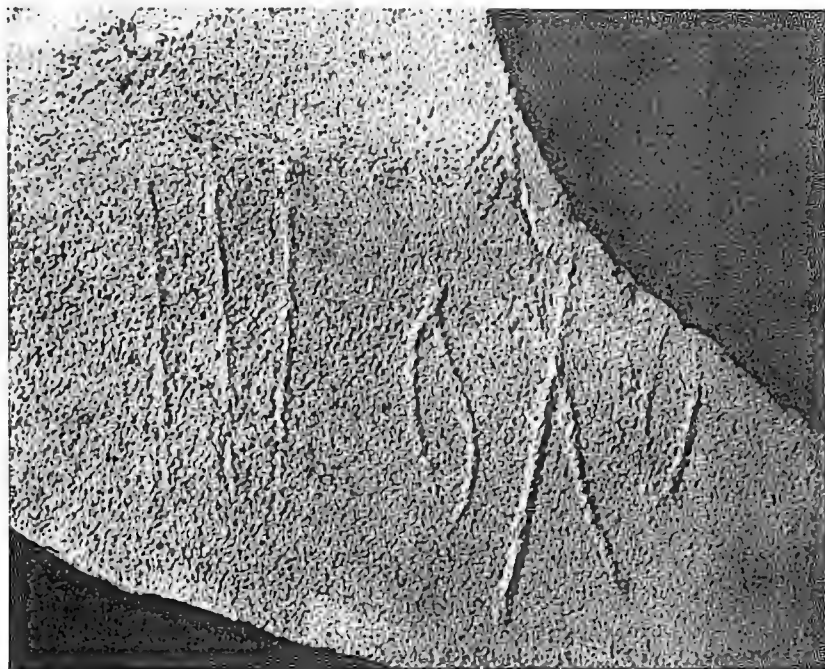


Fig. 2. Writing in a still undeciphered script from Indus Valley Civilization. a. and b. show clay seals on which Indus Valley writing appears. Seals of a particular shape, also with Indus Valley writing, have been found as well in the Persian Gulf. c. shows Indus Valley writing incised in a fragment of a large clay jar. d., a fragment from the base of a large Mohenjodaro storage jar, shows an instance in which the writing appears to have been incised in the mold for the base of the jar.

c



d



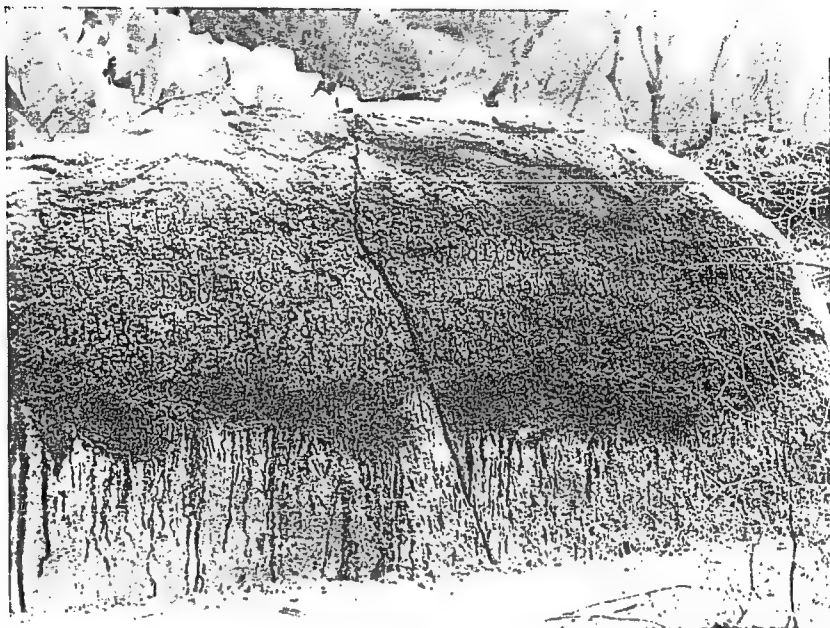
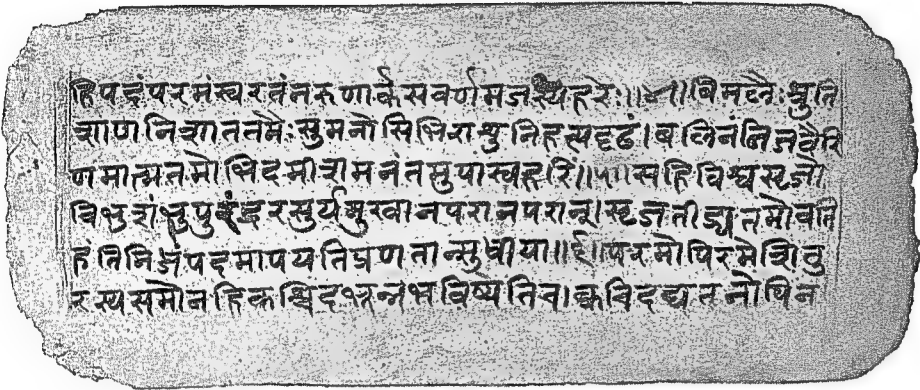


Fig. 3. Edict of the emperor Aśoka (reigned mid-3rd c. B.C.) written in rock and discovered in the 1950's in the state of Uttar Pradesh in India's north.



a



b

Fig. 4. Two folios from Tibetan and Indian manuscripts which show an aura around the text. Folio a. is from a Tibetan manuscript treating the former births of the person who brought Buddhism to Tibet. The entire folio is colored black in such a fashion as to indicate the aura around the text. Folio b. is from an Indian manuscript of a religious poem. The area around the text is colored yellow with a powder.

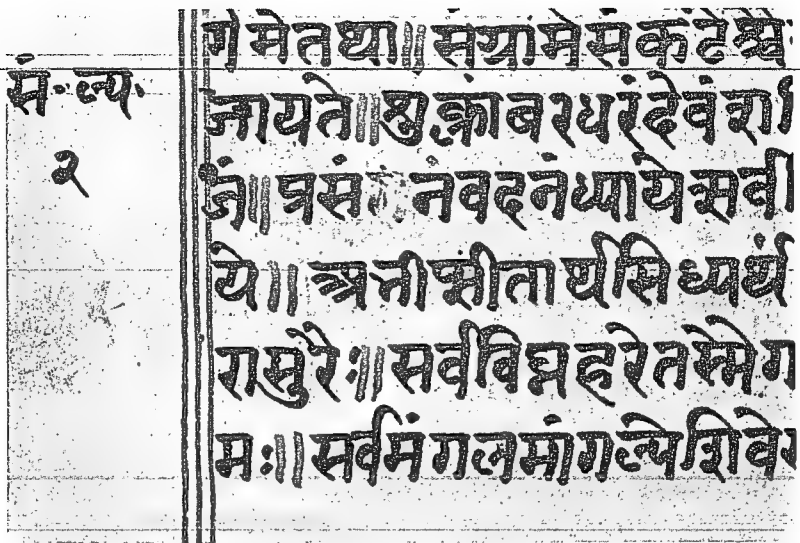


Fig. 5. Section of text from a North Indian manuscript. The character for the fourth syllable on the third line of text is covered over with a yellow preparation so as to indicate that it is a mistake and should be ignored.

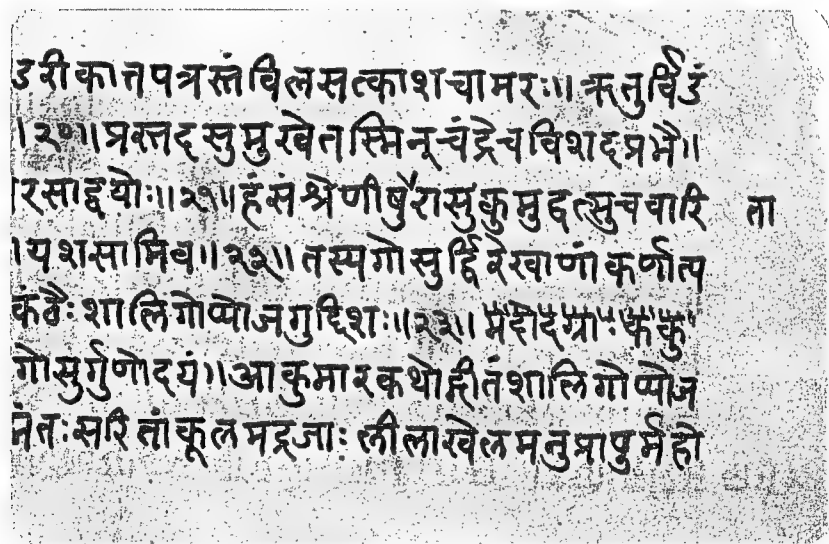


Fig. 6. Section of text from a North Indian manuscript showing a section of text being « erased » by the use of short straight lines perpendicular to the upper line over each letter.



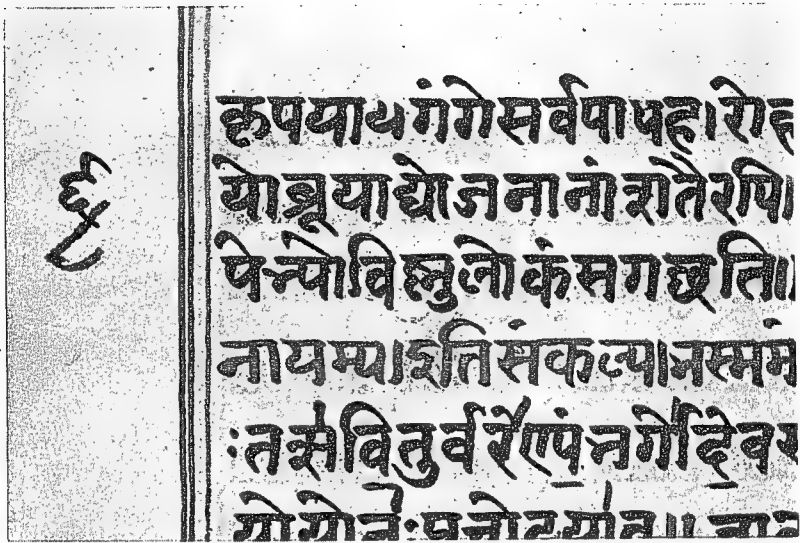


Fig. 7. Section of text from a North Indian manuscript in which the fourth character on the first line is written incompletely without the upper line so as to indicate that it is a mistake and should be ignored.

[illegible][illegible]

Fig. 9 Early 20th c. letter written in Mahājānī script in Eastern Hindi. While this script normally does not use a top line over its letters, a top line is drawn here over most letters. The line is not drawn over a single letter at a time, as a scribe would do, but over completed lines.



a

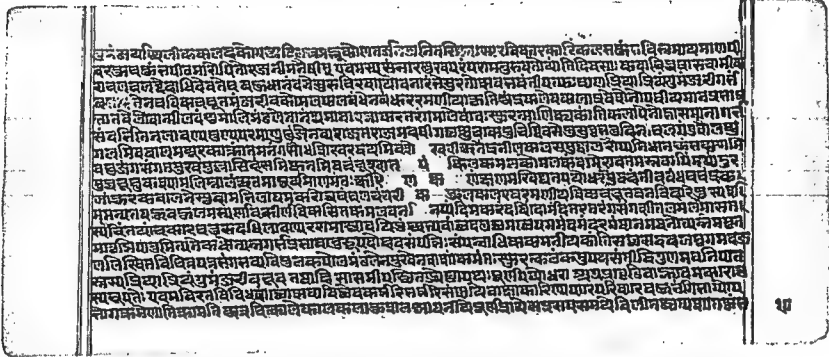


b

Fig. 10. Two Orissan palm leaf manuscripts. Orissan characters are written with a large circle or semi-circle over each letter while the distinctive characteristics of each letter are written small.



a



b



c

Fig. 11. Folios from 3 Jain books showing the indication of space through which the tie cord would be strung in a palmleaf book. a. and c. are folios from different manuscripts of the famous Jain « Story of Kalakā », b. is a folio in Jain script from a Sanskrit literary version of the famous « Story of Nala and Damayanti ».

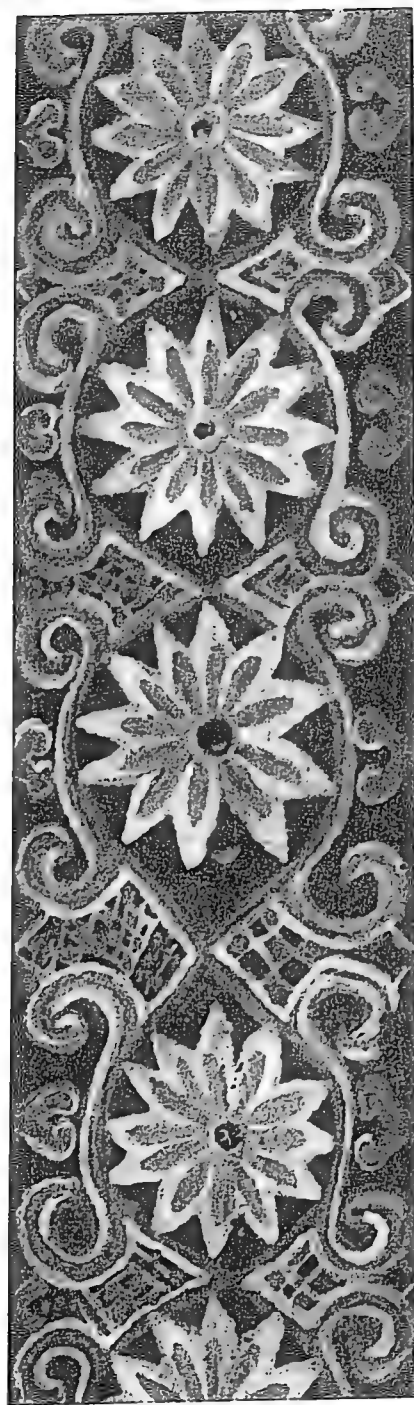
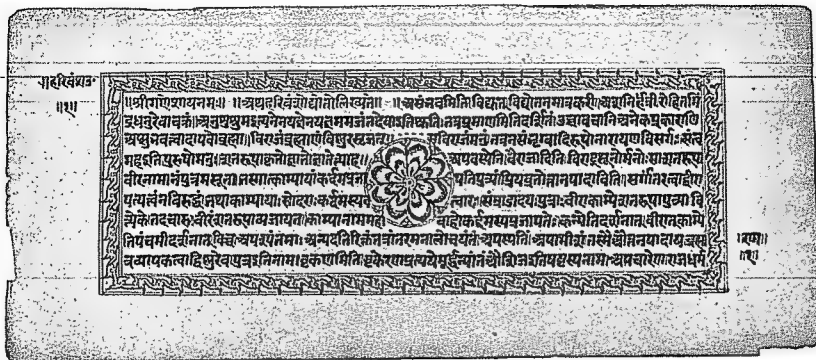
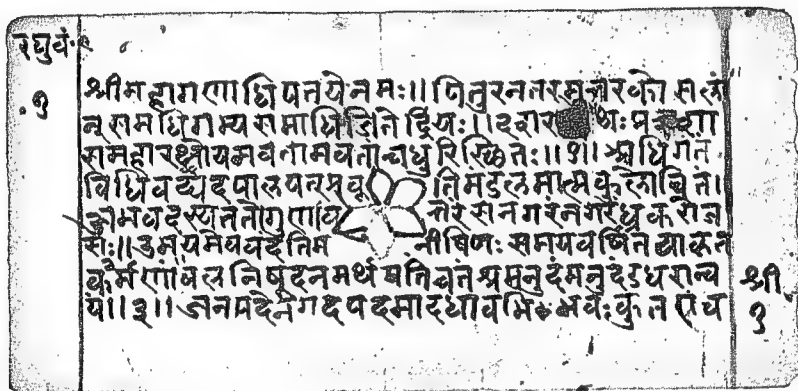


Fig. 12. Decoration on the inside of a wooden bookcover for a Sinhalese palmleaf book relating one of the many stories of the Buddha's former births. The lotus in the center here, through which lotus there is a hole for the book's tie string to be drawn, contains atypically an odd number of petals instead of the normal even number.

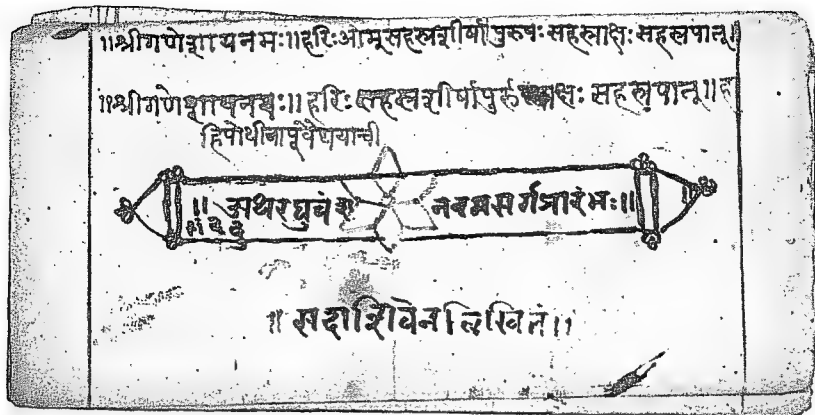


a

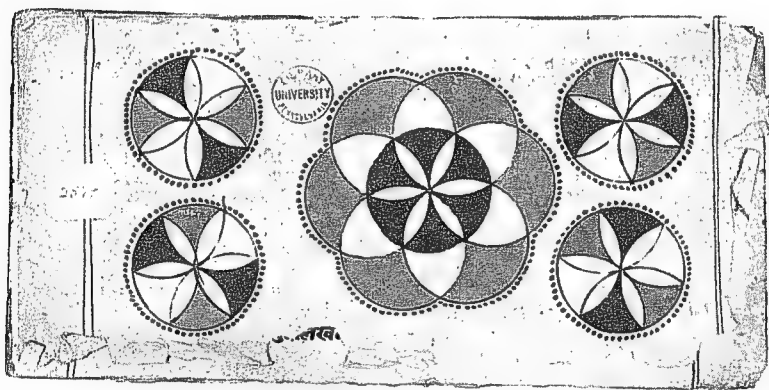


b

Fig. 13 (a. and b.). Folios from North Indian Hindu paper books which atypically preserve and indicate the space left in palm leaf books for the tie cord. a. and b., folios from a text of the sacred «Lineage of the lord Hari (or Kṛishṇa)» and from a section of the «Lineage of Raghu (an ancestor of the epic hero and god Rāma)», preserve this space in sections of text and depict in it a lotus.



c

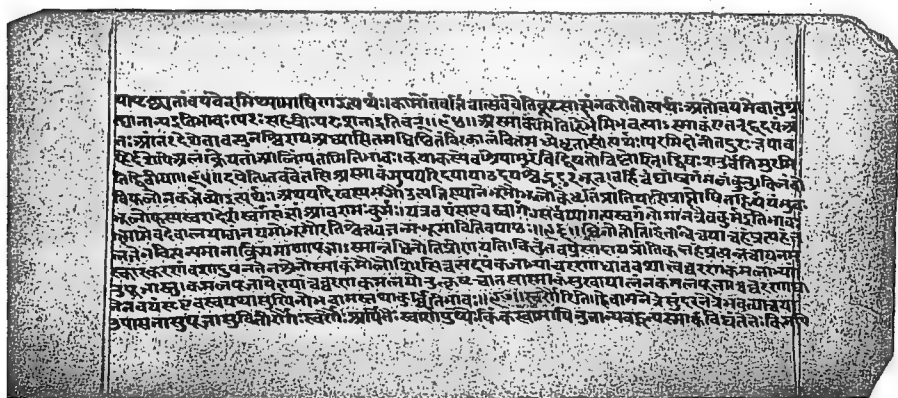


d

Fig. 13 (c. and d.). Cover folios from the same « Lineage of Raghu » and from the sacred « History of the Blessed Lord (Bhāgavata, or Kṛiṣṇa) », depict such lotus motifs on the outside of the books in positions where the tie cords would normally be located.

र्वसंगेवितथप्रयत्नः॥जडीकृतस्त्र्यंबकविक्षितेनवजं  
 ॥४२॥संक्रुद्धचेष्टमगेद्वजगमहास्यं वचस्तस्यदहंवि  
 भतांविवेदसर्वंभवान्भावमतोभिधास्ये॥४३॥मान्यः  
 नासर्गस्थितिप्रत्यवहारहेतुः॥गुरोरपीदंधनमाहितात्ते  
 णीयं॥४४॥सत्त्वमदीयेनशरीरवृत्तिंदेहेनिवर्त्तयितुप्र  
 गिरिशप्रभावाविमुच्यतांधेनुरियंमहर्षेः॥४५॥अथां  
 तदंष्ट्रामयूखैःशकलानिकुर्वन्॥भूयःसभूतेश्वरपार्श्वे

a



b

Fig. 14. Sections of text from North Indian books showing saffron applied over, a. verse numbers and punctuation devices, and b. verse numbers, occasional letters at the beginnings of verses, and occasional beginnings of verses.



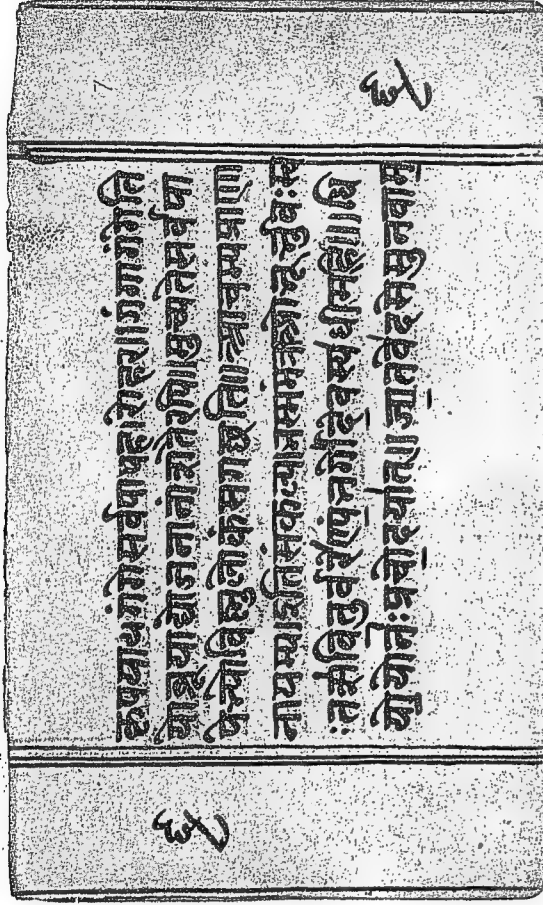
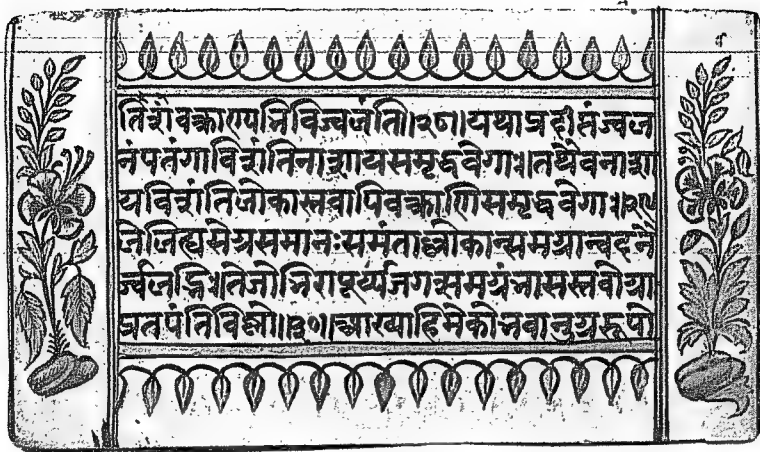
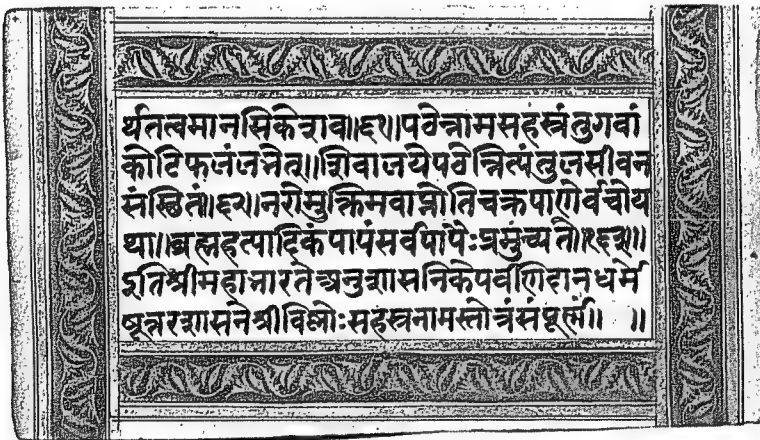


Fig. 15. Folio showing punctuation devices, ritual direction and identification of preceding text written with red ink.

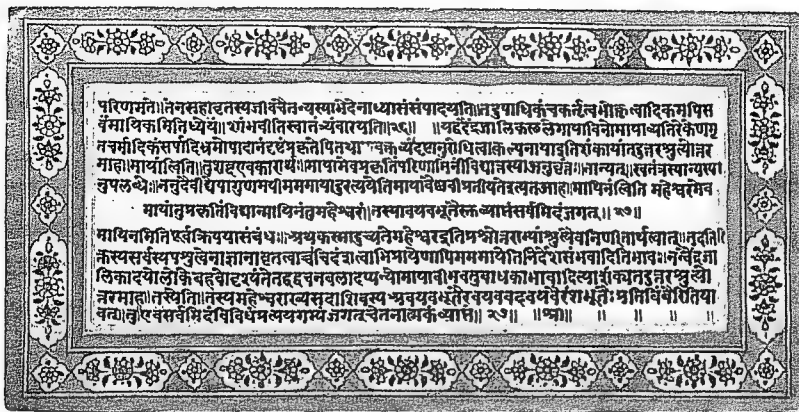


a

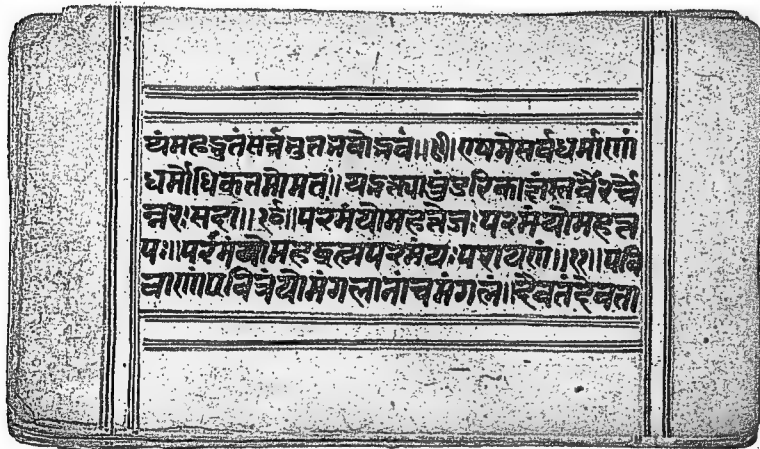


b

Fig. 16. Examples of floral borders. These are sometimes very ornamental, sometimes very simple and abstract. a. through g. show such borders around folios of text. Such borders can also be seen, for instance, in figs. 10, 11 and 13. More commonly, such borders do not appear around the text but are drawn only on the outside of the first and last folios. h. through m. show such borders. Such borders are sometimes quite crude, as in k.



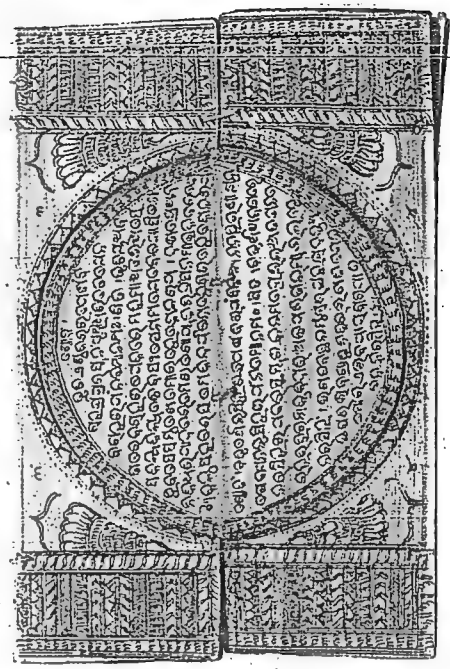
c



d



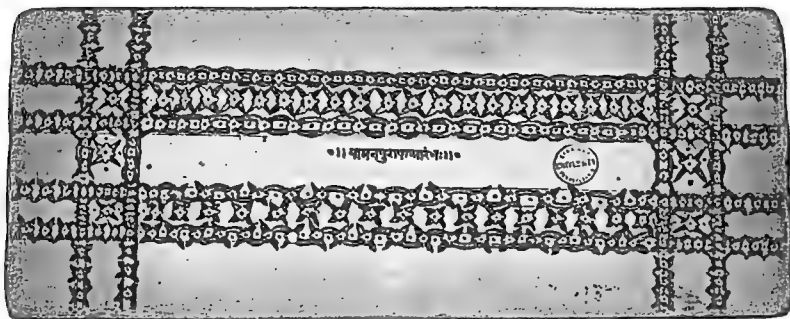
f



g



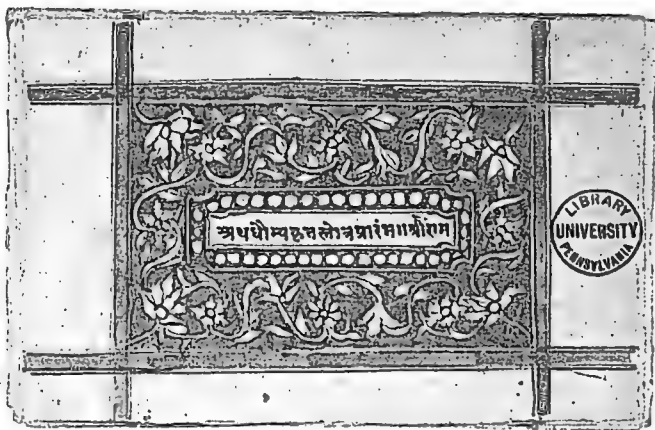
e



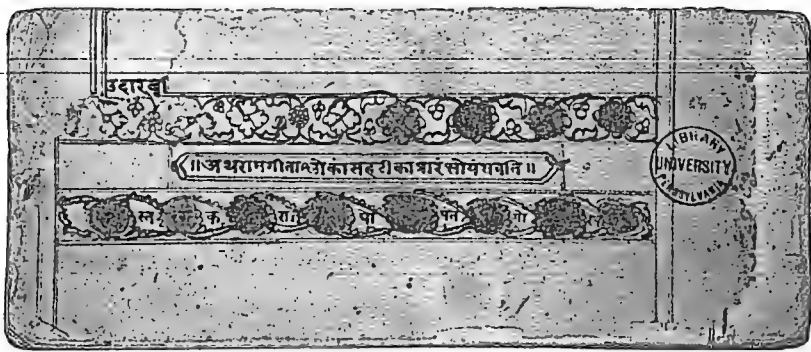
h



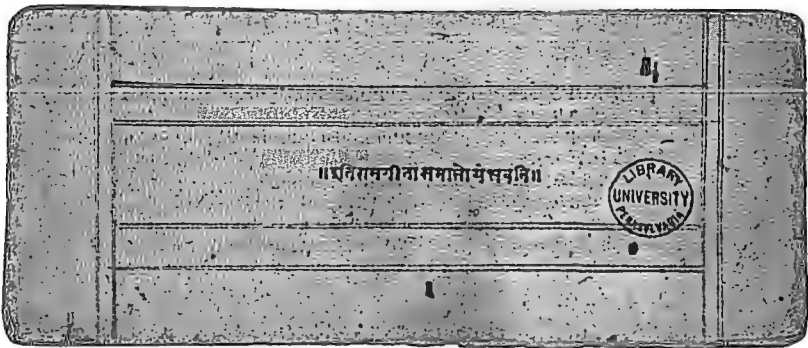
i



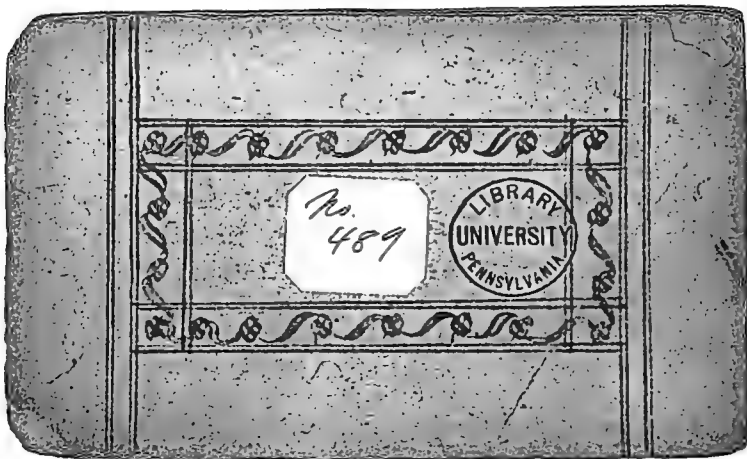
j



k



l



m



Fig. 17 Crude drawing in Western Indian style using red ink of the god Ganesha flanked by two attendants. The drawing appears on the outside of the first folio of the book and invokes the presence of Ganesha, a god of wisdom and protector of paths travelled.



Fig 18 An indication of the presence of Ganesha in the person of the animal with which he is associated as an indication of his character, the rat conceived of in a fashion not entirely atypical of Freud's later associations with this animal. The presence of the god is indicated ever so slightly through a seemingly incomplete sketch sparing in its use of line. The sketch appears in the middle of a text of one of the most sacred books of Hinduism, on the reverse of an accompanying illustration.



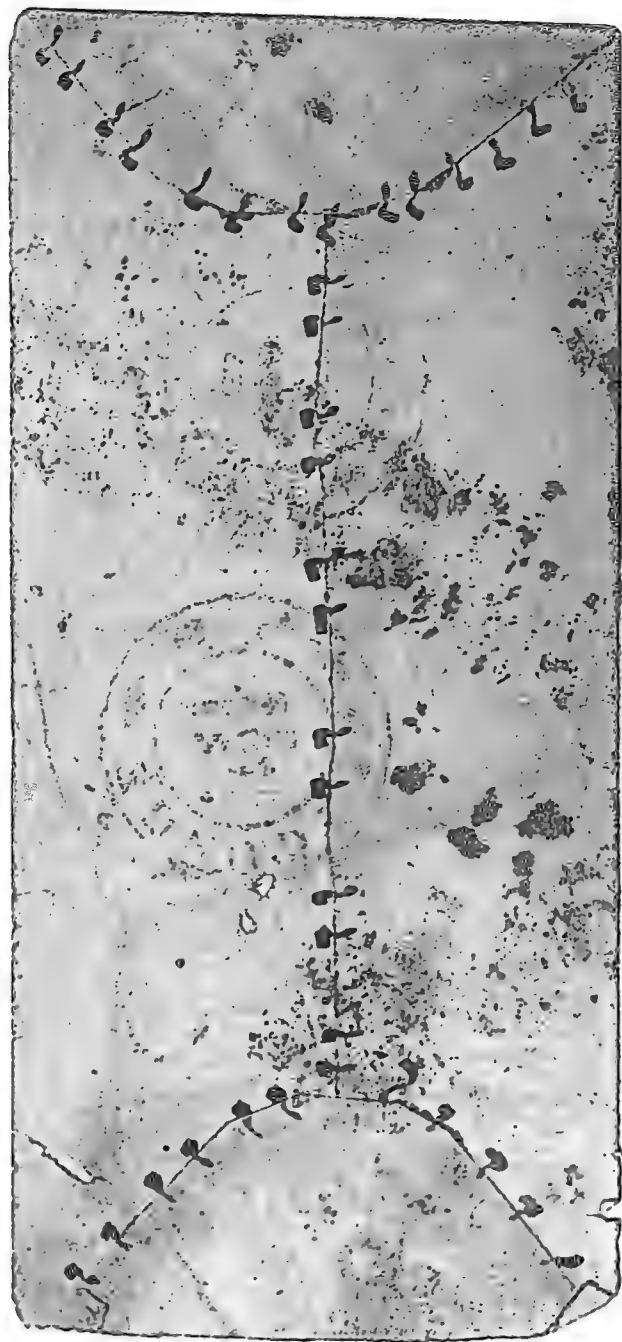


Fig. 19. An old envelope with the « crook of Gaṇeśha » drawn repeatedly over the seams of the envelope so as to insure that the contents remain safely within the envelope. This usage of the « crook of Gaṇeśha » is not unlike the usage of the Seal of Solomon in Islamic tradition to hold a genie in a bottle. In India, the Seal of Solomon, or Star of David, is known as the *Gaṇeśha-cakra*, or « mystical conformation of Gaṇeśha ».

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Figs. 2a.b. from Sir John Marshall, *Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization...*, vol. 3 (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1931), Copyright Government of India, by permission of Arthur Probsthain. Figs. 2c.d. from *Expedition 9.4* (Summer 1967): 37, reproduced with permission of The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania. Fig. 3 from a photograph among papers of the late W. Norman Brown, reproduced with permission of the Library of the University of Pennsylvania. Figs. 4a.b., 6, 9, 11a.b., 12, 13a.-d., 14a.b., 16d., h.-m., 17, 19 with permission of the Library of the University of Pennsylvania. Figs. 5, 7, 10a.b., 11c., 15, 16a.-c., e.-g., 18 with permission of the Spencer Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. Fig. 9 from Sir George A. Grierson, *A Handbook to the Kaithi Character*, 2nd rev. ed. (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1899).

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The difference is especially noticeable when one considers the enormous number of true variant readings in the critical editions of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, and this difference is even further impressive when one considers that these editions do not record « blunders ». If one were to consider « blunders », one could probably easily show that many of the true variants are based on other of these readings in a fashion that can be seen more clearly in the especially corrupt *Pātityagrāmanirṇaya* which I edited for my doctoral dissertation.

As Johannes Hertel noted in writing of the Sanskrit *Pañcatantra*, errors are often rationalized into hyper-correct readings by the scribes. This does not appear to be the situation in the case of Jain scribes. In general, Jain scribes are very conservative, whereas Hindu scribes, on the basis of the manuscripts and editions I have examined, are often less careful and more innovative with the « blunders » they find in their manuscripts.

While we cannot be sure, we can probably attribute this to the difference in attitude toward the universe on the part of Jains as opposed to Hindus. There is more of a care for details, a care for individual souls, and an active concern for not incurring bad *karma*, or retribution from the universe, on the part of Jains. While Jains have quite intricate theories of the universe, Hindu scribes would have more of a dynamic cosmic vision. Their attempt to avoid bad *karma* and gain good *karma* would be guided not by accuracy through conservatism but by positive works, which is to say textual « improvement », and by what we may refer to as an indifference in the performance of duty as preached by the book often referred to as the Bible of India, the *Bhagavadgītā*. The copying is performed dispassionately, and the results are left to God.

When Indian scribes make a mistake, it is rarely the case that a letter is just scribbled over. Often a colored paste is applied over the letter, or over the distinctive part of the letter to be omitted (see fig. 5). The written letter is an eternal verity. It can be cosmetized, but it cannot be erased.

At other times short straight lines are put through the different parts of the letters, but more often in north Indian scripts

through the upper line which extends horizontally across the letters, common to all letters (see fig. 6). It is this line which provides the letter with its sanctity and efficacy. Generally, when a scribe sees a mistake in time, he simply need not draw in this line and no further indication of the mistake is necessary. The letter has no force (see fig. 7).

In ordinary usage by people who must write, the omission of this upper line is common. Secular scripts have grown up across north India used for everyday affairs by businessmen and scribes which standardly do not use the upper line. The writing, thereby, has no sacred force. Such an omission of the upper line occurs for example in criminal petitions, police reports and accounting books (see fig. 8). One reason for this is that these relate to human law, and not to divine law. The scripts used across all of north India in which these are commonly written, *Kaithī* and *Mahājanī*, « scribal » and « businessman » script, let us say, as noted, standarly omit the upper line. The upper line can be used, though, and often is for such phrases as, « May it please the court ». Even in the writing of *Devanāgarī* script, I have come across instances in which the upper line is not used. One person whom I have worked with, for example, standardly left this top line off in the writing of *Devanāgarī* till I pointed this out to him, after which time he wrote it in only occasionally. Another looked over what he had written without the line to check if it was correct first, and only then added the upper line. A third would sometimes write in the line, sometimes not. *Devanāgarī* script, of course, standardly uses the upper line.

It is the Jain care for individual souls, noted above, which can probably account for Gujarati script being the only north Indian script associated with a major language of India not to be written with such a line. Gujarat is a part of India in which Jain culture has been most influential. The script has omitted standardly that part of such scripts which provides the characters with their spiritual essence, their soul we might say. Until recently, the script in the main was not used for native books but was restricted to more secular usage. In its stead in this region,

*Devanāgarī* or *Jainanāgarī*, which use the upper line, was employed for writing in the sacred context.

It is not unlikely, in fact, that it was the development of such a line by commercial groups in north Indian cities, or *nagara-s*, for the purpose of being able to write without it in the secular context as in such variant *nāgarī* scripts as *Kaithī*, *Mahājanī* and Gujarati script, which gave the original script its name *Nāgarī*, originally «city-» script as suggested earlier, and as reflected by such grammatically comparable names as *Kaithī* and *Mahājanī*. Such terms as *Devanāgarī*, *Jainanāgarī*, or *Nandināgarī*, which appear later, would have appeared to indicate specifically divine forms of the script utilizing invariably the upper line.

When scribes write, the upper line is drawn for each letter one at a time. I have seen instances, however, when its being drawn was gotten around by drawing in the lines from the scoring of the pages and hanging the distinctive features of the letters from these. By the general modern north Indian practice, this line is drawn in only after the distinctive features of a section of text, either a line or a phrase, for instance, has been written (see fig. 9). Efficacy is in this way given not to individual letters, but to entire thoughts after it has been decided that they are correct.

In Orissa, a conservative section of India on India's eastern coast, the Oḍia, or Oriya script which is used employs a large semi-circle or circle over the distinctive aspects of each letter instead of a straight line (see fig. 10). This semi-circle is the most visually striking aspect of all the letters of this alphabet, the distinctive features of which are in most instances derived from Bengali script to Orissa's north and in a few instances, indiscriminately almost, from Telugu script to its south. The letters cannot be written without the large semi-circle. This can perhaps be construed to indicate to us further that this non-distinctive aspect of northern Indian scripts represents the soul of the letters.

To the south, in the «round» scripts of Andhra Pradesh and Mysore, the entire letters contain the soul. To the north and west, historically a device was developed from the 7th to 10th c. whereby only a section of the letter contained its efficacious aspect. In Orissa, this efficacious aspect of the letter was elaborated on.

While in Gujarat on India's western coast, in a Jain context the local script adopted only the desacralized distinctive aspects of the letters and was employed in the main in secular contexts only, other scripts which employ the upper line being used in the sacred context.

It is noteworthy that in Tibet, the script of which is said to have been revised from an older script of Indian origin some time in the 7th c., the same time that indication of the upper line was first being employed in India, there are two main varieties of the script. These are *dbu can* and *dbu med*, or «head possessing» and «headless», referring to the employment of the upper line or lack of such. The former, which uses the upper line, is the ecclesiastical script used for native books. The latter, without the upper line, like Gujarati script, is used primarily for secular purposes. Apparently, «head possessing» or «headless» refers to possession of a soul, the distinctive aspect of a person which contains the *brahman*, which word in India came to mean «soul», being the head as in the early hymn *Rigveda* 10.90.

The frequent observation that the medium of writing, paper as opposed to palm leaves, let us say, led to «squarer» scripts in India's north and «rounder» scripts in India's south simply is not the case. All groupings of Indian scripts were written on stone and copper or brass as well. And Tamil script, unlike other Indian scripts most probably devised like the European Cyrillic and modern Thai scripts, is written most commonly on palm leaves and not paper, and is perhaps the «squarest» script in all India.

Since it is Orissa and the areas to Orissa's south which have remained more faithful to the use of dried palm leaves for writing instead of switching to paper as did the northern part of India from about the 10th c., let us say, we can suspect that we have in the differences regarding what it is which is sacred about the letters one of the reasons for the conservatism.

The import of this conservatism remains obscure until we consider what palm leaf frondes represent as opposed to paper pages. In all palm leaf frondes there is at least one hole through which the frondes are strung. The space around this hole is left

blank. On paper pages of Hindu books in India we almost invariably do not find such a space, though it is preserved standardly on the paper pages of Jain books, written in a script with a top to the letters unlike the originally secular Gujarati script, so it must have some significance (see fig. 11). This significance is hinted at by an ornamented Sinhalese wooden bookcover which I have seen. Here, one of the lotuses which is painted around one of the holes in the bookcover used for the book's tie string, is lacking a petal present in the other depictions of lotuses on the bookcover (see fig. 12). The number of petals on such lotuses is supposed to be even, and this lotus has an uneven number of petals. In Indic traditions, the universe is represented as a lotus, and such is the significance of the lotuses on this bookcover. We can surmise from the missing petal that its place is being taken by the palm leaf frondes of the book to which the tie string leads. The sanctity of the entirety of the written letters, thus, is matched by the sanctity of the medium. The letters are scratched into a medium which represents, and which therefore is, the universe. In northern India, except among the Jains, the desanctification of the distinctive characteristics of the letters is matched, on the other hand, by the desanctification of the medium. In Orissa, the sacralizing feature of the northern scripts became an integral part of the letters, which borrowed from more southern scripts in which the entire letters were sacred as well. The medium remained the traditional sanctified one on this account.

That palm leaf frondes and the paper pages of traditional Jain books represent the universe, conceived of as a lotus, can also be seen in the occasional occurrence of such a space in Hindu books written on paper in comparatively modern northern Indian script (see fig. 13). In such instances, a lotus device is drawn in the space which by tradition was left for the tie cord. We also can occasionally observe lotus devices drawn on the two outside sheets of traditional Hindu paper books in the position where the tie cord hole normally would be located. With clarity, on such accounts, the significance of this spot can be associated historically with the significance of the lotus.

When we turn to the writing in Indian books, an additional feature indicating the sanctity and divine force of the written word

is that sometimes letters have saffron applied over them (see fig. 14). Often this is applied to significant aspects of the text, such as indication of the speakers or punctuation devices. At times, though, it is applied by a scribe sporadically to letters. The use of saffron indicates reverence for sanctity in India. And indeed, a person who is reading a text may apply saffron as part of his devotion while reading a text, which has the practical aspect of helping him keep his place in the text.

At times, a red wash may be used instead over significant aspects of the text. Or these sections may be written in red ink (see fig. 15). Sometimes there is a limited use of gold leaf as well. Red, in general, in India indicates reverence for sanctity and divinity. A stone originally intended to be used in building a Muslim hospital had red paint splashed on it by accident, *once*, and it became from this beginning the leading Hindu curative divinity in the area.

Sometimes, the folios of a traditional book may have been covered over with a yellow preparation. Two such preparations have been recorded, and one of these contains arsenic which has the practical effect of preventing the pages from being destroyed by insects. But there is indication that it is not the practical effect which is paramount in this practice. It is only one of the preparations which contains arsenic and, to note only one other point, often not all pages of a book are treated this way, but only every second, third, or twentieth page, let us say.

No one has ever investigated this point, but we have to suspect that we have here a practice comparable to the Tibetan practice of indicating an aura around a section of text. As noted earlier, there are occasional instances of an exactly comparable aura, using such a yellow preparation, on occasional native Hindu books. Very possibly related, though we cannot be sure yet, is the frequent practice in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia of gilding the edges of palm leaf books.

Books in India are sometimes ornamented with floral borders (see fig. 16). Sometimes these borders are quite ornate and realistic, at other times ornate and abstract representations of flowers. Quite often the borders are in effect no more than several straight lines,



sometimes colored attractively. There is suggestion that these straight lines are simplified and abstract indications of floral borders. Commonly, clearly recognizable floral borders appear around the name of a book on the outside pages.

We can understand such borders to be an actual laying of flowers in an act of devotion on an item in the realm of the sacred. Just as wreaths of flowers are laid on books and writing implements on *Sarasvatī Pūjā*, during which holiday in January all instruments including hoes, for example, are worshipped and writing particularly is not allowed, just as gods normally are worshipped with wreaths of flowers, so in these instances the sanctity of the written word can be seen at all times by a permanent lay of flowers effected through the use of line.

We can further judge on the basis of comparison with ornamented wooden bookcovers for palm leaf books that these floral wreaths function as well as a representation of the entirety of the universe in which the text is etched, so to speak. Except such floral devices when shown around text appear to be comparable to an aura and to represent the entirety of the universe in which the text is manifest and of which the text is itself a representation, in and of itself, rather than being a reference to the medium. Just as the sanctity of the medium is indicated in a traditional Indian palm leaf book, and in some instances in paper books as well, so also there is an indication of the sanctity of text, which like the medium is understood in the Hindu context to be an expression of the universe, or perhaps of a way of the universe which has become manifest. The dichotomy is comparable, in a very real sense in the Hindu context, to the Tamil attitude toward the elements in the graphic representation in Tamil letters of the sacred syllable *ōm*. The medium is understood as the soul which permeates the universe, conceived of in its masculine aspect as having been born of lotus which was set in the primeval ocean and which was a manifestation of itself. The floral border would represent perceived manifestation, the perceptible world, comparable to the eternal reverberation of the sacred syllable *ōm* as represented by its nasal component, *m*. An aura, on the other hand, while referring to text rather than medium, in a Hindu context would be a reference to and

indication of the soul of the text without explicit reference to the entirety of the universe. In a Buddhist context, in which « soul » is not an accepted category, an aura would refer instead to the text's sacred essence comparable, for example, to the sacred essence of humans.

A border, it should be added, need not be ornate or otherwise attractive to our eyes to indicate reverence for, and sanctity of the written and manifest word of the text. In some instances, it is in fact drawn quite crudely. Drawn line both for letters and for other real items is efficacious, though, and creates a reality.

For instance, it is common to begin illustrated books in India with a depiction of Gaṇeśha, the god of wisdom and protector of individuals on all paths travelled. In some instances, though, Gaṇeśha is depicted quite crudely (see fig. 17). It is not beauty or depiction itself which is being striven for in such instances, but rather an invoking and setting in place of Gaṇeśha's presence.

The drawn line is the presence of the god. This can be seen most clearly in a book on the reverse of one page of illustration of which line indicates only ever-so slightly that Gaṇeśha, in the guise of his nature and presence, a rat, is peering out from a page. The presence of the god has been indicated and thereby set by the use of line (see fig. 18).

We have here a usage of art, reflected in the Indian attitude toward writing, which is comparable to the speculated upon significance of the paintings in the Upper Paleolithic Aurignacian caves in Europe. But here we verge into the meaning of art in India.

Envelopes for letters in India often have what is known as the « crook of Gaṇeśha » written across their seams (see fig. 19). In our Western culture, perhaps comparable stamps are often put across the seams of registered letters in order to indicate to the receiver that the parcel has not been opened, although this is perhaps a modern rationalization for the truer reason which we find in India. The « crook of Gaṇeśha » functions not unlike the seal of Solomon on a bottle containing a genie in the Islamic tradition. The seal of Solomon, or star of David, is in fact in India known as the *cakra*, or « mystical conformation », of Gaṇeśha. On envelopes, the crook can be understood to hold in the

sacred force of the contents for the person who receives the letter. It helps ensure delivery, the sanctity of the syllable cutting through any misfortune which might prevent its delivery just as Ganesha himself protects people who travel from misfortune. The mark's indication on letters is clearly not for adornment, but for the efficacy of its line. And this helps explain to us why Hindus are not noted for letter writing, a transmittal across distance of universal command the writing of which on paper or some other medium no doubt as well detracts from their personal stored up potency just as it does with scribes.

Clearly, in India the drawn lines of writing need not be beautiful to indicate divine presence. In fact, that divine presence resides in the lines may be reason for crudity in the hand. The writer has a fear of what he is writing on account of the letter's sanctity, just as an individual commonly has terror in the face of the sacred and divine.

Further, in such a context in which the visual context is the sacred, beauty often may take on a different form which we cannot recognize readily from our Western secular vantage. The colors of Indian stamps seem dull in the United States but in India, where everything is pervaded by the colors of the earth and the hues of the sky, and garbage is thrown about here and there haphazardly to be recycled by nature, these stamps seem colorful. Just so, in the realm of the sacred, the beauty of a written line may have a different measure.

In different cultures, there are different attitudes toward writing.

In Chinese culture, there is a taste for both conservatism and aesthetic beauty which is reflected in the Chinese writing system. The characters today are not very different from those which evolved centuries ago, and there is a premium on fine calligraphy.

In European culture, the attitude toward writing has been effected by the desacralization of the culture in general which has grown out of the fight between the nobility and clergy for dominance, the rise of commercial groups followed by the rise of mass rule, and perhaps as well by the initial spread of high culture to less highly organized peoples without developed attitudes toward

writing. Today, words which traditionally are taboo to a written form are commonly inscribed everywhere, and there is no longer any degree of a premium on penmanship. In general, it is probably on account of writing having not been securely in the realm of the sacred in Europe, and therefore not feared, that it has not changed significantly since Roman times.

Within the Indian sub-continent we have some indication of historical developments regarding the attitude toward writing. As alluded to above, in northern Buddhism, as found to India's far north in Nepal, we have evidence of a focus on form and beauty in writing as a means of gaining merit by copying texts. This may have been due to an influence by Chinese culture at the time which can be seen in other aspects of Indian culture since that time as well. Since the sanctity of form was emphasized over the sanctity of the content and the meaning of the form, our Indian books from this tradition are most often exceedingly corrupt. Today, we have in India as well a Western attitude toward writing. We have in India in general, though, an attitude which is perhaps closer to one group of our intellectual forebears, the Hebrews, and to the common attitude in the ancient Near East in a living situation. It often has been said that India is a living museum in which there can be found practices which died out elsewhere generations upon generations ago. The Indian attitude toward writing is such an instance.